



SMARTCANE BMP OFFERS FLEXIBILITY AND FREEDOM FROM GOVERNMENT AUDITORS

By Kate Gowdie
Smartcane BMP Manager

From December this year, a revised set of reef regulations will require growers to prepare what the government calls a nitrogen and phosphorus budget (or N and P budget).

At the beginning of each year, growers will be required to calculate and submit the sum total of nitrogen and phosphorus recommended for each block on the farm.

Once fertiliser applications are completed at the end of each year, the sum totals of nitrogen and phosphorus applied on the farm are also calculated.

Growers will be assessed as compliant if the total amount of N and P applied to the farm for the year is equal to or less than the total amount of N and P recommended for the farm.

Growers still need to have the soil tests, records, farm maps, etc. required by the current regulations, as well as mapping of "management zones".

But the regulations, at heart, are still based on the block-specific recommendations derived from the SIX EASY STEPS program and soil analyses undertaken before planting.

These recommendations cover the annual requirements for nutrients and ameliorants for the whole crop cycle.

Freedom and flexibility

Growers accredited in Smartcane BMP will not be in the sights of compliance auditors, as the State Government recognises these growers exceed the requirements of regulations.

The regulations only focus on N and P rates, and as all growers know, production is about complete nutrient management, and much more.

Smartcane BMP takes an holistic approach.

For non-accredited growers, the new regulations do have one benefit over the current compliance process.

The current system requires every block to have received N and P rates that match exactly, or are below, the corresponding recommendations.

Just 1 kg/ha more than the recommended rate on one block can make you non-compliant.

The new N and P budget process will impose a 'cap' on the amounts of N and P to be applied to the whole farm,

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and the compliance process will be less concerned with how closely each block application rate matches the corresponding recommendation.

However, growers will not be able to exceed the farm cap for N and P, not even by 1kg.

Some growers may not be aware that Smartcane BMP has always accommodated a practical and flexible approach to nutrient management.

N and P rates are required to match recommendations within the practical constraints of rationalising the number of blends being used, the accuracy of calibrations, and the environmental effects on flow rates of product (such as relative humidity).

As a result, N application rates are generally assessed to meet BMP requirements if they are within 10% of the recommended rates.

Smartcane BMP has also accommodated significant deviations from the recommended rates of N or P where there are sound agronomic reasons.

For example, several growers have presented strip trial data showing that certain soil types require more N or P than recommended through SIX EASY STEPS.

Growers also now have access to the SIX EASY STEPS toolbox, developed by SRA, which identifies situations that may require more or less N or P.

These adjustments when based on sound agronomic approaches demonstrate the use of all steps in the SIX EASY STEPS program

We do worry that the N and P budget process will encourage growers, or their advisors, to deviate significantly from the soil-specific SIX EASY STEPS recommendations for N and P without sound agronomic reasons.

The SIX EASY STEPS recommendations have proven to be very reliable over time. Any deviation from these should be carefully considered if growers are to avoid wasting fertiliser.

For example, we have recent cases of growers being advised to take 20 to

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40 kg/ha N away from third or fourth ratoons and add this N to the applications for their plant crops.

As plant crops are the least responsive to N, this option risks wasting fertiliser, losing additional N to the environment, and not meeting the nitrogen needs of ratoon crops.

Another source of concern is the persistent myth that optimal N rates for sugarcane are directly related to yield. This is not the case, as any inspection of the extensive field data underpinning the SIX EASY STEPS readily shows.

This belief has been used to justify approaches to N management based on concepts like block yield potential.

Extensive field data does not support such approaches.

Growers wanting to both (1) ensure their nutrient management fully and efficiently meets the needs of their crops and (2) demonstrate to government that they exceed regulatory requirements, should seek accreditation in Smartcane BMP.

This program has practice standards backed up by industry science while also accommodating the specific management needs of your farm. ■